RELIGION

Pre-Christian Beliefs[1]

The pre-Christian beliefs of the Yakut were closely associated with their mode of life, which was conditioned by the nature of their habitat. The greater part of the Yakut tribe occupied the Amga-Lena elevated plateau. Their occupations and religion were adapted to their environment. The surface of the plateau represents a complicated system of rivulets and brooks separated from each other by vast forested hills and surrounded by mountain ridges. The Yakut distinguish two kinds of land formation: the *urâx* (rivulet), grass covered lowland, and *alas*, somewhat higher plains surrounded by forests interspersed with lakes. 771

The abundance of grass, animals, and birds in the woods and of fish in the numerous lakes, influenced Yakut economic activity. They were cattle-breeders, hunters, and fishermen. In the early historic period they had four or five times as many horses as horned cattle; at present the number of horned cattle is several times greater than that of horses. The Yakut concept of their spiritual world was based on their material surroundings. Natural phenomena, water and land, animals and plants, and the fate of men are directed by independent beings called "owners." The Yakut pantheon includes the following supernatural beings:— 776

Ajy, creative beings
Icci, masters
Abasy, eaters, malevolent beings
Yŏr, man's soul after death

Side by side with them we find the remnants of an earlier conception of the world as being composed of animate beings: *tañara*, sky; *āhā* (grandmother), river; and *uslo*, mountains. We also find *xaya iccita*, the mountain owner, and the germs of more involved ideas: *Ürüñ Ajy Toyon*, White Creator Lord; *Ulūtuyar Ulū Toyon*, Titular Horrible Lord. Not quite clear and somewhat doubtful appears *Arsan Duolai*, the terrible dweller of the underground world. However, only the *Ajy*, *Icci*, *Yŏr*, and *Abasy* play a conspicuous rôle in Yakut life. [774]

Where do these beings dwell? The Yakut have a clear idea of the chief and cardinal points (*diāki* or *diākki*) and their intermediates and also of relative heights. The chief cardinal points are: *ilin*, east (literally, the front, front part); *arhā*, west (and at the same time, the back, the back part); *xotu*, north, for which is sometimes substituted the word, *xañas*, the left side; *sohurū*, south, which is occasionally replaced by the 823 776

[1] This section is based chiefly on V. M. Jonov's article in the *Publications du Musée d'Anthropologie et d'Ethnographie de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de Petrograd.*

2: Jochelson E-5 (1884-1902) 1933 Yakut

word *uñuo*, the right side. For the definition of relative height the Yakut use the words, *tahys*, to ascend and *kĭr*, to descend. The Yakut descends into (*kirär*) and ascends from (*taxsar*) the earth hut; *kün kirĭr*, the sun comes down, and *kün taxsar*, the sun rises.

The dwelling places of supernatural beings are in the upper, middle, and lower worlds. In the upper world dwells the *Ürüñ Ajy Toyon* and also the terrible *Ulütuyar Ulü Toyon*. In the lower world lives *Arsan Duolai*. The *Abasy* live in the upper as well as in the lower world.

The *Icci* and the *Ajy* dwell in the middle world,[1] but somewhat lower, not reaching the lower world.

The *Yŏr* belong to the middle world, whether they dwell on the earth or in the clouds.

The *Ürüñ Ajy Toyon* (White Creator Lord) dwells, according to one informant, at the zenith and according to others in the northeast.

Ulutuyar Ulü Toyon lives in the west; *Arsan Duolai* sometimes in the southwest, sometimes in the northwest.

The *Ajy* and *Icci* dwell in the east. The *Abasy* live at all cardinal points, but chiefly in the west.

After settling in the different worlds and cardinal points, all these spirits began to follow their own modes of life and did not enter into relations with each other. Each of them appears as a complete master of his province, his "people," has his own household and often cattle. In the original Yakut mythology, which is uninfluenced by Christian legends, there is no trace of difficulties or struggles between the various classes of supernatural beings.

Very characteristic of the Yakut beliefs is the absence of conceptions of paradise and hell and the lack of any idea of retaliation as we understand it. The Yakut word *ajÿ* usually translated, sin, means more properly, harm, damage; for instance, *ajÿ* is used when milk is spoiled by a mouse falling into it, or, when a man's bed is contaminated by a frog.

When a man, willingly or unwillingly, had offended some spirit, violated his rights, or did not fulfill his obligations, he was liable to be punished in some way: by illness, epizooty, or some other calamity. The Yakut is a hunter and fishermen. The *abasy-siäce* (i.e., *abasy*, the eater) also procures food for himself, and this food may be the man and his cattle. The *Ajy* and *Icci* may or may not give the man something. They are quite indifferent to him.

[1] There are some exceptions, as, for instance, *dĭlĭñ Icciläh*, the spirit-owner of the thunder, who lives in the upper world.

6: Sauer--117-118 G-5 (1785-94) 1802 Yakut-1-2
116, 756, 782, 796, 823

"When the hut is full, the elder shaman rises, and commands one of the Socha that he knows to be qualified (namely, that has not seen a corpse within the month, and that has never been accused of theft, or bearing false witness against any body, which defiles them for ever, and renders them unqualified for this sacred and solemn task) to take a large goblet, called a tshoron, which is used to drink out of on solemn occasions, and fill it with koumis out of the first symir; then to place himself before the hearth, with his face to the east, holding the tshoron to his breast about [118] two minutes. He then pours koumis three times on the hot embers, as an offering to Aar Toyon. Turning a very little to the right, he pours three times to Kubey Chatoon; then to the south he offers in the same manner to each of the benevolent gods. With his face to the west, he pours three times to the 27 tribes of aërial spirits; and three times to the north to the eight tribes of the pit, and to the manes of their departed sorcerers. After a short pause, he concludes his libation by an offering to Enachsys the cowherdess. The sorcerer then turns the man with his face to the east, and commences a prayer aloud, thanking the godhead for all favours received, and soliciting a continuance of their bounty. On concluding his prayer, he takes off his cap, with which he fans himself three times, and cries out aloud, 'Oorui!' (grant) which is repeated by all present. The elder shaman then, taking the tshoron, drinks a little, and hands it to his brethren of the same order; from whom it passes to the company as they sit, except such as are

defiled. Women are not admitted into the hut; nor are they, or the disqualified, allowed any of the koumis out of the first symir, which they call sanctified, as possessing the power of purifying and strengthening in a divine sense."

6: Sauer--125 G-5 (1785-94) 1802 Yakut
116, 342, 574, 823

"They always take care that the doors of their huts shall face the east. The fire-place is nearly in the middle; the back of the chimney towards the door, and a free passage quite round it. The sides of the hut are furnished with benches and small cabins, which serve for sleeping places. The bench extends about four feet into the hut, where the inhabitants sit. The men keep the south side, and the women the north. Except the hostess, no woman may give any thing to eat or drink to a male stranger before the fire-place, but must walk round the chimney to present it."

7: Shklovsky -- 181 T-3 (1891-92) 1916 Yakut
116, 776, 782, 823

"On the fourteenth day we passed over the Alazeisky Range--the frontier of the Kolymyan region. The ascent is gradual, and the mountains are not especially remarkable; they are more like rows of hills. Following the local custom we tied little pieces of rag on the pole at the crest of the mountain. White partridge feathers, different coloured ribbons, bunches of horsehair, all these were offerings to the Spirit of the Mountain. As the ascent of the range is easy, the Yakuts do not think it necessary to waste too many offerings, finding that the spirit is kind enough without them. It is different on the terrible Verkhoyansk Range, where merchants, as well as Yakuts, throw to the spirit money pieces of butter, fat, etc."

7: Shklovsky -- 227 T-3 (1891-92) 1916 Yakut
116, 773, 776, 823

"Apparently the Evil Spirit of Yakutian legend, when he quarrelled with the Great White Spirit, spat out more masses of earth on the right bank of the Lena than on the left. According to this legend the earth was originally covered with water, The Evil Spirit and the Great White Spirit disputed as to which was the more poweful.

'What can you do?' asked the Great White Spirit.

'I can dive into the water and bring up a piece of clay,' replied the Evil Spirit. And he did so, and brought up the clay in his mouth.

The White Spirit took it and of it made the earth, but it was quite flat. However, the Evil Spirit had not given up all the clay he had brought, but had kept some in his mouth. The White Spirit, noticing this, struck the Evil Spirit on the back of the neck, causing him to spit out the clay, and wherever it fell mountains appeared."

13: Sarytschew--12 N-3 (1785-90) 1806 Yakut
116, 782, 823

"On our way we had occasion to cross a great chain of mountains, named Atbas, to which the Jakuts pay homage, as in fact they do to all distinguished mountains, by depositing offerings of horse-hair on the trees. My guides did not omit this ceremony, each Jakut tearing out some hairs from his horse's tail, or mane, and hanging them on the nearest branches of the trees."

18: Priklonski--83 [4] E-5 (no date) 1891 . Yakut
116, 764, 766, 823

Graves in wooden boats (lodje) put upon wooden pegs I saw on the Sagstyr island. The corpses in all of the some twelve graves were so arranged that their heads pointed to northwest; they lay on the left side of the body. They were dressed and equipped as mentioned above. At their feet (with hardly one exception) there was a little dish filled with groats, and a small wooden spoon. Those buried in the boats had an oar and a scoop of the kind which is used by sailors to rid a boat of water.

Children are buried like adults, except that they are taken away on little sledges, and that they are left in the cradles where they had grown up and died. On children's graves one can still see their toys lying on the top.

27: Coxwell--262 [3] B-3 (no date) 1925 Yakut
116, 776, 782, 823

"They speak of a supreme God, but do not worship him. The earth was made by such a Being, and at first it was small and level; then an evil spirit scratched up the surface, so that there appeared hills and valleys. The Yakuts have their good and evil spirits, and the shamans deliver earnest addresses to air and water gods. He throws melted butter into the air to appease demons and express gratitude to the gods."

37: Dobell--312 G-2 (1812-13) 1830 Yakut
116, 484, 782, 823

"We travelled to the source of the Ourak, crossed three very steep mountains, and descending, passed a large lake, the source of the river Udama, surrounded by mountains, and three or four versts in length. On the trees that skirted the road, at the tops of these mountains, I observed a considerable quantity of horse-hair, tied in little bunches to the branches, which my guide informed me, were offerings to the gods of the mountains, made by the Yakuts who had crossed them without accident."

46: Cottrell--136 T-2 (1840) 1842 Yakut
116, 804, 823

"In the vicinity of Yakutsk they have a curious way of measuring the distances by land, which appears to be peculiar to this people; the Kirghis have something analogous, but not similar to it. As the old German mode of reckoning distance was by time (the stunde), so do the Yakuts calculate by the time required to boil their food in cauldrons with which each yourte is furnished. This consists of the bark of fir and larch, which does instead of bread, not the outside, but a thin inner pellicule, which grows between the outer bark and the wood, and which marks every year the growth of the tree. This takes an hour to boil in these cauldrons, and the distance which can be performed in this time is called keusse. They have the keusse on foot and on horseback, which are of course very different. It must always be a most inaccurate way of judging of distances, as it must vary according to the state of the roads, and the speed of horse and man."